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Social Inequality in Modern Higher Education

Lyudmila Gegel^a, Irena Lebedeva^b, Yulia Frolova^{b*}^a Russian State Technical University named after K.E. Tsiolkovsky, 3 Orsha Street, Moscow, 121522, Russia^b Astrakhan Branch of the Caspian Institute of Sea and River Transport, 3 Hmelnitsky Street, Astrakhan, 414024, Russia

Abstract

One of the urgent problems of modern society is the accessibility and quality of higher education for various population groups. The importance of the knowledge and skills acquired in the process of education to achieve social success is proved by a large number of studies. However, the value of higher education for the representatives of different social groups is an open to debate issue. Many researchers point out that the function of education as a channel of the social mobility is gradually neutralized. On the contrary, education becomes an institute of strengthening and reproduction of the inequality. This process contributes to another socio-cultural effect – dislocation of the value scale for those who are deprived of access to quality higher education. As a result we can observe the erosion of basic mental values in the society, the growth of resentment sentiment and social tension. The given article discusses some aspects of the above mentioned problems.

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1. Introduction

One of the key problems of modern higher education is quality of education and ensuring equal access to it, regardless social, economic and cultural condition of people.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +79170868017; fax: +78512262060

E-mail address: usfro@mail.ru

There is a wide range of international researches showing how the acquired educational capital (in particular, duration of training and quality of the academic results) defines successful socialization and vital achievements. Thus, in many researches it is noted that the function of education as a social elevator will gradually atrophy, thereby turning education into the social institute of fixing and reproduction of inequality.

This problem is given full attention by Russian authors, however these researches have generally stated the character while there is still a greater demand for listing the real reasons of educational inequality and how it's influenced by the character of national education systems. There is also a demand for the comparative analysis that might reveal how it is influenced by the politics carried out by the developed and developing countries.

This analysis will allow allocating the groups of countries that can serve as an example of a successful combination of reducing inequality policy in relation to higher education action and improvement of quality of education in various social, economic and cultural contexts. It will also help to describe the best practices most corresponding to the Russian social field, reveal opportunities for domestic educational policy. The data of the international comparative researches (like TIMMS, PISA) can become a perspective information base for identification of the best strategies of educational policy providing decrease in educational inequality.

The initial prerequisite of this research is the idea that additional educational opportunities can be considered by more successful and more safe social groups as a way of providing additional benefits in the education system (from the point of view of transition to higher educational step and/or enrolling in more prestigious educational institutions).

In the situation of unequal access to these services (owing to restrictions from the offer (of the corresponding infrastructure), and from demand (material prosperity of families) it can cause serious damage to the principle of equal opportunities and promote preservation of the social and economic inequality.

New opportunities for research of the specified questions are opened by using the data collected by "Long-term research of educational and labour trajectories" (The study of educational and labour trajectories of pupils and students, 2015). In recent years there were a number of attempts of adaptation and application in Russia of the "school-effectiveness" and "school-improvement" models aimed at strengthening the capacity of schools in providing quality of education for children from families with the low social status.

The case-analysis of these models' use in Russia is important because the research of practice and effects of realization of the "school-effectiveness" and "school-improvement" models in the cross-national context is one of the most up-to date methods of the world-wide researches (Bert & Creemers, 2007).

This research will hopefully add to the understanding of the reasons that lead to inequality of access to higher education and ambiguity of educational results. It will expand the ideas of educational policy strategies and concrete organizational and administrative models that strengthen the capacity of the higher school as the channel of vertical social mobility.

2. Research novelty

The given article presents the results obtained in the longitudinal study. The authors give the analysis of the unique empirical material (longitudinal studies of educational and labor trajectories of university students on the basis of the Russian part of the PISA project), the correlation patterns of higher education and socio-economic situation of families, the school context and overall level of development of the local educational infrastructure is also considered in this study. The study makes it possible to obtain new information about the institutional arrangement features of national educational systems, types of education policies and specific strategies that promote or hinder the emergence of educational inequality. The article represents these results in the summarized form. The novelty of this article is stressed by the fact that this publication presents the conclusions about the possible mechanisms of transformation of higher education system as a channel of upward mobility in the countries with different types of economic and social policy for the first time.

3. Objectives, methodology and research design

The object of the research is the phenomenon of inequality in the higher education. The research objective is to reveal key regularities in the reproduction of inequality in higher education in various demographic and socio-

cultural situations, define the connections between inequality in education and the maintenance of educational policy, define the scientific bases for concrete measures for positive changes.

Research goals are:

- analysis of educational inequality in the system of higher school in the context of expansion and differentiation of additional educational opportunities for the families with various social and economic status;
- analysis of foreign practices on the decrease of educational inequality and minimization of the phenomenon of resentment in society,

Research methodology:

- theory of reproduction function of education and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977);
- theory of the human capital (Becker, 1993),
- typology of educational systems based the selection models (Hopper, 1972).

Research methods:

- analysis of literature;
- secondary analysis of international comparative inspections of educational achievements (Programme for International Student Assessment);
- analysis of all-Russian long-term research data of educational and labour trajectories;
- analysis of official statistical sources.

4. Discussion of the research outcomes

The second half of the XX century is the era of mass institutionalization of education throughout the world, with the dynamically growing coverage of educational services and appearance of public educational institutions even in the world poorest countries. Educational systems are built one after another on certain models.

Developed countries began to struggle for “education quality” in the second half of the XX century carrying out various kinds of reforms such as the introduction of government standard programmes, tests, exams, ratings to link school education with the strategies helping to achieve personal economic success. These reforms are often carried out in conjunction with the ideology of educational choice (Finn, 2002). However, there was some tension between these two ideologies of “standardized quality” and “selection”. This contradiction in the developed countries was solved with the new educational policy, having changed the approach to the understanding and perception of equality in education. Being neo-liberal in their nature, these new political programs saved the bureaucracies that were focused primarily on achieving quality. The equality issues were pushed to the background, including the possibility to provide equality through achieving “excellent quality” with the help of privatization of all educational institutions. The entire responsibility for the quality of processes and results was delegated to the higher school; the bureaucratic structures of the state were intended only to monitor how well the school bears this responsibility.

Such a policy had serious consequences for different social groups in relation to the issue of the access to the quality higher education and education in general. Structural reforms that were carried out there in order to ensure the stability of international capital, by eliminating the imbalance between international accounts and domestic consumption led to the reduction in state funding for education, increasing the share of private educational institutions and the accompanying reduction of household expenditures on education. Thus, the educational system, which is tightly regulated in relation to structural and substantive levels, makes even a greater inequality of educational opportunity.

Educational inequality is affected by differentiation of additional educational opportunities. The first detailed study of the correlation of educational inequality and differentiation of additional educational opportunities began in the US in the 1970s - 1980s. It turned out that visible risks associated with the reproduction of social inequality can be laid even in a harmless thing like summer vacation. Motivated and well-off families tend to use this period as efficiently as possible to have time to “recharge” their students with the greatest advantages that will ensure them a successful completion of higher school program. Depending on the amount of free time and money “summer” strategies of families and students themselves can vary from individual lessons to trips abroad for educational purposes. At the same time students from low-income families, as a rule, are deprived of such opportunities due to financial constraints and/or lack of cultural capital (when their families do not have any interest in organizing

summer educational entertainment), and then they simply “lose” their summer time. The problem is so serious that, as a possible solution, some Western experts suggest to consider a possibility of providing low-income families with free voluntary participation in year-round training programs (Finn, 2002).

If inequality in learning outcomes is determined by the economic inequality, it can be assumed that the most effective measure to reduce educational inequality is a redistributive policy (for example, direct or indirect transfers to poorer segments of the population). If progress in studies and a chance to continue their education, further success in the labor market, etc., is more dependent on non-economic factors, the interventions aimed at reducing educational inequalities must, above all, compensate the influence of family in the areas where it most effectively implements its social benefits, for example, the organization of summer educational recreation for students, subsidizing programs of additional education (optional) for the poorest, etc.

Thus, the hypothesis which can be formulated based on the information given above, reads as follows: availability and the level of market development of additional educational services, other things being equal, are the factors stimulating educational inequality.

We can have a better understanding of this situation with the help of a multiple regression analysis, with which we tried to expand the variation in educational outcomes for variation in a set of independent factors. With the help of this analysis we can easily see the overall “picture” of consistent patterns for all types of educational outcomes. This ratio indicates quite clearly that students from two-parent families where both parents have higher education are in a better position in terms of academic progress.

We also should mention that educational outcomes are not associated or negatively associated with the indicators of purely material well-being of families. We can state that this fact corresponds to stereotypical notions about people of high income families: a relaxed attitude to their studies may be due to the confidence about their future. This assumption is not far from the truth in the light of the research of some western scientists, emphasizing as a possible mechanism for reduced motivation a “compensatory benefit”, i.e., students from wealthy families are partly immune from making wrong decisions or committing acts of bearing damage (Bernardi, 2012). In any case it turns out that a possible positive effect of higher material conditions that is potentially realized through the hiring of tutors and access to further education is clearly insufficient to provide a significant advantage in training.

We analyzed the cases of successful reduction of educational inequality and improving the quality of educational achievement on the basis of broad international context. To solve this research task the study used data from PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment). More than 70 countries participate in it (Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), 2005). The study is conducted once every three years; the first wave was launched in 2000. PISA shows contextual information about the availability of education in addition to the data on the educational outcomes of students and the form of longitudinal studies helps to evaluate the dynamics of the educational achievements of the participating countries. The countries were classified on the basis of two main features - an index of social welfare which was calculated in the PISA study and the average score in mathematics within the country. The proportion of resilience and failing students in the country was calculated on the basis of the quartile distribution index of educational outcomes in mathematics, which was seen as an indicator in assessing the dynamics of educational inequality in the participating countries.

The analysis of the dynamics of change in the educational results was conducted in each of the index groups as well as in the whole country. Two scales were used to measure the rating of the countries: the scale, which includes from 64 to 40 countries, depending on the waves of research they have been involved in, and a scale, which included only 39 countries having the results in all four waves of PISA research since 2003. The Analysis of the dynamics in the study of PISA results and indicators characterizing the level of equality in national education systems reveals mixed trends.

The data of PISA study show that a significant number of countries (25 of 64) were able to improve the results of their students from 2003 to 2012. Significantly fewer countries (Germany, Turkey and Mexico) were able to increase not only the level of achievement, but also indicators of equity in education. A number of countries demonstrate both high achievements and a high level of equality. Among these countries are Canada, Finland, the Netherlands, Australia, Korea, Hong Kong, China (Macau), Liechtenstein, Estonia.

These countries traditionally give an example of high equality in education combined with a high level of results. Analyzing the dynamics of the most prosperous group we found a mixed trend. The position of Australia remains stable when the position of Estonia and Liechtenstein is improving while in the Netherlands we notice the reduction

in the achievement level. A serious drop in rankings of results occurred in the traditional leaders of International Studies: Canada and Finland.

Finally, the dynamics of different social groups is of special interest. This issue is obviously important for Russia as, despite the high equality level and a high degree of the academic inclusion, Russia steadily shows the low level of the social inclusion, i.e., higher education institutions differ in the students' social characteristics.

How does this situation influence the social feeling and social satisfaction of young people? It is also a very interesting and difficult problem. It is clear that the lower social population layers have a steady deprivation feeling because of the restrictions and discrimination. Young people are gripped in the social vice: the ideal examples (which people still have in their consciousness) make to go up the value scale and real circumstances constantly pull down. Long deprivation causes spiritual impoverishment and necrosis. The characteristic satellite of such periods is a resentment phenomenon, "soul self-poisoning" (Scheler, 1999). The resentment provokes fear, depression, self-abasement, keen interest in family squabbles and gangster wars, the abuse of swear words that poisons a human soul and creates the conditions of its latent existence. The spiritual values which a person could develop, studying at a higher educational institution, are pushed aside to the sociocultural life periphery and become abstract and unclear at best and are cynically mocked at worst. As a result, the burst of deviation, cruelty, suicides, family disruption, unprecedented birth rate recession and early mortality, i.e., the nation degeneration, occur in the society. Such a situation arises when individuals have cultural experience and valuable orienting points, but they are so deeply hidden from the aggressive environment reality and do not almost reveal themselves.

Resentment is a result of a long destructive impact on the personality with no moral overcoming of the negative things (education, development, rejection, forgiveness, repentance, avoiding, opposition, etc.). Having become an independent factor of the socio-cultural processes, resentment sets a tonality of the people's behavior in general and can gradually change the structure of the existing culture, marginalizing it (Frolova & Lebedeva, 2014).

However, the resentment behavior loses its significance, if the deep-seated cultural core (of the society, person, educational system as an institute transferring knowledge and values) splits and disintegration starts. Therefore, it may be said that the "luxury" of a peculiar decadence in relation to the world is admissible when there is a strong cultural beginning hidden deeply but not allowing the system to fail.

Degradation cannot be infinite, this threatens the society existence. The resentment, having reached vulgarity and having devastated a person, culminates. In these conditions, the society as a self-regulating system is making a shift to the usage of more powerful regulation mechanisms or creation of the new ones. This happens not often and always leaves a trace in the public consciousness. These mechanisms start running as a last means to "return" people to the level of culture and ritual accepted for further development. If it does not even help, the socio-cultural system perishes. Understanding such a tendency, the developed countries actively engage in reforming higher education system in terms of knowledge quality and education affordability.

5. Conclusion

The authors have considered the most main strategies to diminish inequality and increase the general level of the students' academic achievements.

Firstly, this is the general policy directed at the strengthening of the following principle "every student is capable of great achievements" in the society and the system of higher education (Equity and quality in education. Supporting disadvantaged students and schools, 2012, p. 43).

All considered cases of success in this respect show the efficiency of the system inclusion into the education system which eliminates the obstacles for the formation of the most long academic trajectories for all the students' groups of all higher education institutions.

Secondly, the elimination of the selection barriers and serious pre-higher school tracking, producing the risk of segregation is combined with the broad differentiation of educational programmes the quality of which meets the national standard. It is provided with a number of measures:

- strategy of supporting gifted students and the students, having problems in training, specified in the educational regulations;

- orientation of the requirements to the professional competences of lecturers, their scientific maturity and activity;
- existence of different types of higher education institutions, teaching the programmes, designed at the level of the educational organization, including higher education institutions of single-discipline and non-state sector.

The third component of the considered strategies which can be discussed as an example of investing resources into such points of higher education system where they can give the maximum positive changes: it is a purposeful policy for support of difficult families by means of the education system.

The fourth point which is necessary to pay attention to is the policy of balance between the active and responsible centers and taking on the responsibility in the provinces with the right to make strategically important decisions.

Thus, the authors' research resulted in the specification of the potential and mechanisms of transforming the system of higher education, maintaining its functioning as a channel of the vertical mobility in the states with various types of economy and social policy.

Existing models of comparative analysis of the national educational systems and educational policy have been upgraded and added in terms of influence on the educational inequality and interests of various social groups. Research analysis has a new focus, involving the comparison of the achievement dynamics of the specified groups of students, studying at higher education institutions, from the families of the different levels of social, economic and cultural resources at several stages of the international PISA comparative research.

The authors have obtained new empirical knowledge on the specific features of the institutional structure of the national educational systems, types of educational policy and certain strategies, promoting or inhibiting the educational inequality occurrence.

The novelty of the research findings is as follows. Using the unique empirical material (longitudinal study of educational and labor trajectories of the students of higher education institutions on the basis of the Russian part of the PISA project), the regular pattern after with the movement of certain students in the educational system depending on individual circumstances (including economic and social situation of families, the school context and the general level of the development of local educational infrastructure, including the infrastructure of additional educational opportunities) have been studied at the individual level.

The dynamics of the achievements of the specified groups of students of higher education institutions from the families with the different levels of social, economic and cultural resources has been observed at several stages of the international comparative PISA research.

The research results may be introduced into:

- the system of the assessment of education quality and the efficiency of the educational organizations,
- practice of design and implementation of the regional programmes for support of the higher education institutions, carrying their activities in the difficult social conditions of the province and showing low educational results.

The research results are used now and will be introduced as analytical and methodical accompaniment of the state educational policy of ensuring affordability of quality higher education and reduction of the risks of the educational inequality.

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